

## **On Hospitality and Pilgrimage in Marcel**

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*Abstract:* In this paper I present a reconstruction of Gabriel Marcel's philosophy of hospitality, and some elements of his underlying philosophical anthropology which continue to be relevant. Philosophical commentary on hospitality has tended to conceive of hospitality in terms of a gift offered from a "possessor" to a "needer"; I subject this conception to a quasi-Sartrean and also Marcelian "deconstruction" in which it becomes apparent that such "hospitality" can conceal a profound and exploitative egotism. *Contra* some previous readings of Marcel, I advance the argument that Marcel offers a radically inverse account of hospitality in which it is the host who possesses nothing, and the guest who gives the gift of remembrance of "being on the way," the human condition of pilgrimage.

### **Introduction: What is Hospitality?**

Like many small and everyday human acts, the act of hospitality is familiar when undefined, but becomes surprisingly tangled under the lens of phenomenological analysis. If we try to think of the question "what is hospitality?", the intersubjective structure of this act becomes quite complex: as hosts, we are peculiarly ourselves, but we empty ourselves out to think only of our guest's needs, precisely by thinking of the other's needs as if they were our own. These dialectical movements of absorption and alienation must be clarified. Beyond such phenomenological analysis, to be hospitable represents a stance taken with regard to "the stranger," not only as an individual but also as a social category, and thus one that has further moral and political implications. For these reasons, "hospitality" as a theme has attracted periodic philosophical interest, with some notable remarks on the subject provided by Jean-Paul Sartre, Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, as well as some more recent commentaries following in the Levinasian/Derridean footsteps. Much of this discussion refers back to Gabriel Marcel, another French philosopher who devoted considerable thought to the analysis of hospitality. In this paper, I would like to describe a first philosophical model of "hospitality" as it has sometimes been portrayed in this literature, including by scholars of Marcel. Second, I present a critique of that initial account of hospitality in a "Sartrean" phenomenological/existential mood—an exposure of this first "hospitality" as concealing the possibility of an egotistical "bad faith." I will show that Marcel agrees with that critique, though expressed in his own gentler and more hopeful style, and finally I will present what I believe to be Marcel's own account of hospitality, as reconstructed from various works. The difference between the two "hospitalities" is grounded on a radically different understanding of the metaphysical structure of the human ego and self, or philosophical anthropology.

To start, let us provisionally define "hospitality" as involving one person or party, who has something, giving it to another party, who does not have it. These gifts may be tangible or intangible (food, a bed, warmth, friendliness, etc.), but the precondition of having something to

give seems—at first glance—indispensable to hospitality. Thus, in trying to visualize “hospitality” the image that comes to mind, I think, is of a warm and cozy indoor place, in which a host is dwelling, and into which a guest is received—to be given a meal, shelter, social company, etc. If we wanted to try to show how hospitality is distinct from the simple conferral of a gift, we might say that “hospitality,” beyond mere “gift,” further entails the conferral of a location, a respite from the condition of being a traveler or of being “dis-placed.” We will take this as an initial definition of hospitality: it is an intersubjective act taking place between the dyadic pair of a “host,” who has both a place and something to give, and a “guest,” who lacks, and is being given, both. Without the gift the “host” is no host; without the need the “guest” is no guest. Both require the other for their role to become operative.

Brian Treanor, in a recent volume devoted to hospitality, says as much: “Hospitality always happens in a place; it . . . occurs . . . between an implaced person and a displaced person. Only an implaced person can be hospitable. A displaced person, qua displaced person . . . cannot be hospitable because she cannot give place to an other. When the host ceases to be a host . . . or when the guest ceases to be a guest . . . we can no longer speak of hospitality.”<sup>1</sup> Something like this definition seems to be implicitly operative in many philosophical discussions of hospitality. For example, there are two major accounts from Levinas and Derrida, both of whom have tried to construct an “ethics of hospitable obligation” with particular reference to the situation of politically displaced persons: refugees, exiles, or those who are in some such way an “outsider” to a whole social community.<sup>2</sup> These ethical reflections on hospitality impose the duty on the self of surrendering possessions to the Other, i.e., of making gifts, on the basis of the radical incommensurability of the other’s “alterity.” It is the fact that I *cannot* imagine myself in the other’s place, or *vice versa*, that requires me to exercise hospitality.<sup>3</sup> Marcel comes into the question of hospitality, not only with his own extensive reflections on the subject, but also because Levinas explicitly critiqued Marcel’s version of hospitality as entailing only a “relative” alterity, which Levinas considered insufficient to ground a radical ethics of absolute obligation to the Other.<sup>4</sup> Defenses, criticisms, and expositions of Marcel’s views on hospitality have been given by, for example, Schwarz, Treanor, and McCown.<sup>5</sup> I find, however, that these readings, whether or not directly responding to the criticisms of Levinas and Levinasians, still tend to assume that Marcel’s idea of “hospitality” is similarly based on the underlying model, as above, of an act of gift from the possessor, or the one “at-home,” to the one in need and without a place.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Treanor, “Putting Hospitality in Its Place,” in *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, eds. Richard Kearney and Kascha Semonovitch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p.50.

<sup>2</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2000); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alfonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); see also Andrew Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality* (Cambridge, UK.: James Clark, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> See Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, p.19.

<sup>4</sup> See Brian Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), pp.92–102. I quite disagree with Treanor in his account of Marcel’s thinking vis-à-vis Levinas, but a detailed response to his thorough and thoughtful interpretation of Marcel would require far more space than is available here.

<sup>5</sup> See Joe McCown, *Availability: Gabriel Marcel and the Phenomenology of Human Openness* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978); Mary Francesca Schwarz, “Gabriel Marcel’s Metaphysics of Hospitality” (PhD dissertation, University of Dallas, 2020), Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity*.

## Hospitality and Bad Faith: A Criticism

There are certainly passages in Marcel's writings that seem to support such an interpretation, particularly in *Creative Fidelity*.<sup>6</sup> However, I think that a deeper thread of Marcel's philosophy has been missed in this reading. I find that underlying Marcel's remarks on hospitality is a somewhat hidden anthropological theory: Marcel's profound and radical deconstruction of the phenomenological and psychological ego, which is, in my view, the main shape taken by his lifelong aim of responding to and overcoming Sartre's pessimism about human motivation. I suggest that while, at a certain depth, Marcel's speaking of "self-gift" does describe a "gift" of "self" in the positive sense above, this must be read in the context of Marcel's deeper and more consistent claim that the ego is a psychological structure which must be shattered before true intra-personal charity can emerge. In other words, "self" and "ego" must be kept distinct to understand Marcel; a true self may be hidden under the projections of a false and desirous ego. To begin explaining this, let us take the intuitive definition of hospitality above and trace out within this image the invisible shape of the boundaries of the ego. Consider: 1) what happens if I see someone in need but I have nothing to give them? 2) What happens if I try to give to a person who already possesses what I wish to give them? 3) Most important, what happens to hospitality when I try to give to a person who doesn't want to be in need of me?

Touching these points of tension shows that the original model is not adequate to explain what hospitality really is. First, the definition of hospitality, exclusively in terms of concrete gift, reduces hospitality to a situational virtue, like "liberality" in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>7</sup> Hospitality is only available as a possible attitude to egos that *possess* the requisite "abundance" and "place"; subjects who lack these possessions cannot practice hospitality—as Treanor's previously quoted remark makes quite clear. Phenomenologically, that means that hospitality has not transformed the ego itself as a radical ethical opening, but rather is contingent upon accidental properties or events from which the ego remains distinct—in other words, it is not the kind of person that I am or can become that is in question, but rather what I happen to have at hand through the accidents of history. That is to say, if, on the one hand, I *have* a home and choose to open it to the homeless, and if, on the other hand, I don't have a home and therefore shrug, saying, "ah well," there is in common between these alternatives an underlying passivity of my own being with respect to the act of generosity. The actual *choice* has been externalized from my agency into the accident of a possession, or its lack. In the second question (what happens if I try to give to someone who already possesses what I am giving them?), hospitality is transformed into an awkward *faux pas*, once again by an extrinsic contingency. I was all ready to be gracious and generous to someone, to pour myself out for them, but it turns out they already ate dinner, are on their way back to their own house, have plans for the evening.

However, it is the third reflection (what happens to hospitality when I try to give to someone who doesn't want to be in need of me?) that really exposes the failure of our initial model of hospitality, for this last question turns hospitality into a vicious comic parody of itself. Imagine the host or hostess valiantly being generous to someone who "doesn't *want* their

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<sup>6</sup> See Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1964): "To receive in this context is to admit in or welcome an outsider into one's home" (pp.27–28); "I hold in principle, that reception, hence receptivity, can only be considered in connection with a certain readiness or pre-ordination. A person receives others in a room in a house, if necessary, in a garden; not on unknown ground or in a forest. . . the rather subtle and almost inexplicable relation embodied in the expression *being at home*" (pp.88–91).

<sup>7</sup> See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book IV, Part 1, in any edition.

charity”; a host who forces the guest to be needy, to become the other role necessary to the dyadic pair’s existence. The resentment we are speaking of here, therefore, is not that of a recipient who pridefully disdains truly necessary and attentive assistance, but rather that of a recipient who correctly perceives that they are only serving as a placeholder or category in an internal dialogue of the giver with himself or herself. The giver first wants to think of himself or herself as generous, and on that pre-determined basis deliberately seeks about for someone to be generous *to*, indifferent as to whether the aid given is useful, appropriate, or genuinely wanted. We may note that when a gift of this kind is rejected, a giver of this kind will sometimes react with prideful rage, as if to say: “Oh, you wanted something *more*? What I chose for you is not good enough for you?”. Features thus revealed of the underlying emotional landscape, such as this kind of indifference or this kind of rage, are evidence that the “generosity” here in question is actually a vice disguised as a virtue. The generous impulse is exposed here as not just misapplied but fraudulent, *self*-interest disguising itself as concern for another. This is the unhealthy emotional drive that C.S. Lewis acutely diagnosed as the “need to be needed.”<sup>8</sup>

In the context of hospitality, what has been betrayed by our examination of such secretly egotistical hospitality is that the fullness of the host’s ego, its communion with itself, is a reflexive rather than homogeneous communion, which extends beyond the boundaries of a consciousness and even a body into its environment and returns to itself from its object. The ego sees itself only through the reflection cast back at it by an object in its environment, and those objects therefore appear as phenomena in our field of awareness as *combined* with an element of our own ego that is at first invisible to us. When someone else appears to me as being a *guest*, in other words, that may well be no more than the sign of the extreme degree to which my own ego has deflected and covered over the appearance of their genuine equality with myself, the possibility of real intersubjectivity. If this is the case, when I give to them, only possessions change hands: my ego has potentially escaped unaltered from my encounter with the stranger, whom I may not even have met and who may be largely a creation of my imagination! At the extreme, the person in question will then be nothing more than the ground or materials for the erection of a “self” for myself to look at and recognize, for the dialectical, reflexive process of self-production. When I give some change or a coffee to a homeless person, is there not sometimes a detestable smugness, a self-approval, in my heart which sneaks in before I can reject it? In these cases, we can clearly see the boundaries of the ego overshadowing and destroying the “inter-subjectivity” which we instinctively feel is appropriate to the hospitable relation.

Sartre, who understood this kind of thing extremely well, posed the overall structural problem for such situations in his analysis of “bad faith” in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, my parody of hospitality proceeds in much the same manner as the analyses of self-consciousness Sartre employs to define “bad faith.” “Bad faith” means to be self-conscious, to have failed to completely abandon myself into “authenticity” in a particular situation. Here the “self” in “self-consciousness” is the ego, the structure of my self-image, the kind of person I think I am expected or ought to be, jutting out into my conscious awareness. But acting authentically is not as easy as it sounds; the dialectical resurfacing of the ego in every action and in every thought is *continuous*. Just as Sartre’s waiter in the cafe is a transcendental subject pretending in the social

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<sup>8</sup> I am thinking of Lewis’ remarks in the chapter on Affection in C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1960), pp.64–66.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean–Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), pp.47–72.

role of “waiter,” so, it seems clearly, the “host” could be a transcendental subject pretending to be hospitable towards guests.<sup>10</sup> Marcel explicitly defines his own task against Sartre’s argument in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, so it is in these reflections that we find our point of departure in understanding Marcel’s way to escape the enclosure of egotism.<sup>11</sup> The trouble with “bad faith” is that the suspicion it raises can never be totally eradicated; Sartre’s methodology leads into a permanent and inescapable condition of introspection. Even if we work our way backwards through less extreme distortions of generosity, the unshaken boundary of the transcendental ego is still there, now that it has once been clearly seen. How do I ever really know that I am being truly generous? Can I ever tell myself that I have fully stamped out the traces of self-congratulation in my giving?<sup>12</sup> How can I really be certain that I am not casting someone unwillingly in the role of “Other” because I, again in Lewis’ words, “need to be needed”?

In my view, the philosophical attempts to define hospitality, and defend it as an ethical way of responding to others, using the model of “gift” previously discussed, are crucially weak against this Sartrean line of attack. Thinkers of hospitality have already identified and distinguished “self-centered” and “other-centered” motivations for hospitality, as Schwartz notes.<sup>13</sup> But even other-centered motives still reward *me* with a good feeling; I congratulate myself for my charitableness. We may try to escape a utilitarian framing of hospitality altogether by substituting a deontological one. Thus, Levinas argues that the absolute alterity of the Other imposes an ethics of hospitality on me.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Derrida has tried to argue for a “radical hospitality,” a “law without law” which he understands as a normative demand I cannot escape.<sup>15</sup> But I would counter that the persistent habit in much contemporary philosophy of speaking of “Alterity/the Other” is itself no proof against yet another, deeper iteration of the uneradicated dominance of the transcendental ego. After all, an “Other” only comes to have meaning over against the “Same,” which, as Hegel has told us, came first and is the ultimate end. Thus, in setting up an “Other” ethically or psychologically, I am at risk of doing nothing more than establishing yet another reflexive projection of the ego defining itself, a totem that casts a shadow across my imagination. Now, instead of the purpose of self-congratulation, the Other will be used by my ego to condemn my insufficiency, but used nonetheless. We must not imagine that self-condemnation, just because it is negative, cannot still be a completely self-enclosed psychological mechanism of a single (unhealthy) subject. In the deontological examination of

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<sup>10</sup> Sartre would undoubtedly consider a flattering self-ascription of generosity, or even playing the social role of the “gracious host,” to be a classic example of “bad faith.” As we shall see, Marcel’s metaphysics of hospitality is specifically designed to escape a Sartrean phenomenology which he believes traps us in the self-interrogating perspective of the transcendental Ego.

<sup>11</sup> See Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (Secaucus, NJ.: Citadel Press, 1971), pp.64–67.

<sup>12</sup> Even if I am not guilty of bad faith, is it not clear that, from the Ego’s perspective, I as Ego have freedom to choose at any moment between a generous or a hostile response to the stranger. That freedom of choice itself surely indicates that I am not *entangled* in the situation, not committed beyond retrieval. See Schwarz, “Gabriel Marcel’s Metaphysics of Hospitality,” p.63.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.82–83.

<sup>14</sup> I am here being a little unfair to Levinas, as those familiar with his work will rejoin. Although in *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas moves more toward a position similar to the one I ascribe to Marcel (below), in the earlier *Totality and Infinity* he defines the Other as “absolute exteriority,” the Cartesian “infinite” of “alterity,” in quite strong terms (see Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp.74–79 in particular). Could not such an abstract *logos* swallow the actual, incarnate person of the guest? See Shepherd, *The Gift of the Other*, pp.18–20.

<sup>15</sup> See Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, pp.80–83.

our own motives, whether selfish or unselfish, we have forgotten the guest and disappeared once again inwards, into an attempt to compare our self-knowledge with our unknown subjectivity. Imagine a host standing in a living room, lost in introspection, trying to determine whether he is truly being authentic to the call of the Other's face, while the guest, waiting unnoticed, drips rainwater onto the carpet! There is no escape from "bad faith," or the endless spiral of critical introspection, by a path of inward examination. Note that I am certainly not denying that it is possible to receive a genuine ethical call from "the Face of the Other"/ "the Stranger"; the problem is that, from *within* the sealed phenomenal sphere of the ego (introspectively), good and bad motivations are impossible to definitively distinguish, because *all* consciousness is necessarily accompanied by the reference to the "I." The point I wish to make clear here is that it is not possible to *think* one's way out of "bad faith," because bad faith is a condition arising from the undisturbed self-communion of the ego in defining its environment over against itself, and thinking—even guilt and self-accusal—is merely a continuation of this activity.

Kant set the boundaries of phenomenology when he established that every act of apperception comes with "a possible reference to the *I think*"; that is, everything available to consciousness is by definition mediated by consciousness.<sup>16</sup> In Sartre, that omnipresence of reference to the transcendental ego becomes the threatening shadow of existential selfishness, which constantly tends to distort the thought of every object with the bias of the object's relation to itself. The ego becomes the center of gravity of the observed, phenomenological world, but, crucially, the place where it is found is out in that world itself, because—after Kant—it must be reflected through an object to become available to consciousness.<sup>17</sup> The "ego" in question here is not a transcendental "vanishing point" behind our activity, but—from the first-person point of view—is the content of our experiences insofar as they have subjective significance; my ego extends—is projected by me—into my environment to a certain distance, and that is how I am able to see that it exists. "Yes, she is my upstairs neighbor; she is a bit odd sometimes, but I find her entertaining"—these are given to me as *objective* features of the woman, as *her* properties, when in fact they could be the topology of my own ego as it has settled on her being and been reflected back to me. As we shall see shortly, Marcel's response to Sartre actually includes a *further* extension of this projective property of the ego beyond the subjective even into objects; my ego, the place of my own identity, becomes bound up phenomenologically with things in my environment which I possess. *I am* these things, as far as I can tell.

To return to hospitality, we can see now that our original definition of hospitality, a host gift-giving to a guest, is an objective definition, one given from the outside. We interrogated this definition in a skeptical, Sartrean mood; we accused the host of "bad faith." It became clear that, on the original definition, an act can take place which *looks* like hospitality but which we would not want to call hospitable at all, since it is a host using a guest for self-gratification through the mechanism of a "gift" that may well even be coercive. We now require a new definition. Thanks to the omnipresence of the transcendental ego in all acts of consciousness, we can see that there is a danger here that the ego will always relate all acts of hospitality back to itself, meaning that the possibility of genuine altruism is foreclosed. No matter how hard I try, I will always discover within myself a little bit of self-congratulation about being altruistic. Indeed, we

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<sup>16</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett, 1996), B131–132.

<sup>17</sup> The account I am giving here tracks closely with the transcendental/anthropological model outlined by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, but even more clearly with his argument in his *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, trans. Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960).

would seem to be following Sartre in thus reaching a radical pessimism about the grasping “nothingness” which has produced the ego. As selfhood, as relation, we are situated phenomenologically between the ego as completed objective production and the indeterminate horizon from which it has originated, our “true self” or the vanishing point of transcendental apperception. But we seem to be blocked from ever reaching that “true self” by the ego which is necessarily produced over and over again in our thinking, i.e., the basic act of self-consciousness which produces “ourselves” as our idea or image of our own personality. The question between Marcel and Sartre would now be: is it possible to wrest an *ontological* change in the true self, and to learn that I have done so through phenomenological evidence in the ego? Can I actually *become* a “better person”? How can we find our way back to a truly intersubjective practice of hospitality if the unshaken transcendental self forms the foundation of our every act, and cannot be avoided? We will explore Marcel’s response through the central case study of hospitality. Can I actually act in an altruistic way, and if so, how would the phenomenological evidence of such an act reach me?

### Marcelian Hospitality and Ego-Deconstruction

It is well known that Marcel disavowed the title of “philosopher,” due to his unsystematic way of working and his preference for the theatrical as part of his general approach. However, it would be unfortunate to overlook that in Marcel there is a consistent and deliberate marshaling of conceptual resources, with the aim, unfolding over many years in his journals and essays, of overcoming Sartre’s too-intellectualized skepticism about humanity, and the labyrinthine trap of phenomenological thinking about thinking. The inward search for authenticity by the method of thinking, the search for the true self and the reality of other people in an introspective process that can, by its very nature, only produce reflected and ideal selves, i.e., egos, leads all too easily into an ever deeper alienation from the vital immersion of life in the true world (as Kierkegaard captured masterfully). Marcel therefore rightly observed that Sartre’s philosophy was only a new dialectical shape of “mutilated Cartesianism”<sup>18</sup>; Marcel’s own philosophy unfolds as a project aimed at overcoming the dead-end of dialectical self-examination, the closed hermeneutical sphere of the phenomenological method, through documenting the “short-circuiting” of the ego itself—the moments when the ego is emptied with a crash out into a real world where unexpected and unpleasant things happen to it. Hospitality, as it turns out, is an integral element in this project.

Marcel was fully aware that in adult life we have fallen into the interior of the hermetic sphere of our own ego, and we have forgotten the way to get out, or that there was ever anything else. We must clearly see that, in order to better do battle with Sartre’s observations about the hunger of the ego and its absorption of our efforts to reach “true selfhood,” Marcel first accepts Sartre’s premises. We cannot overcome Sartre’s accusation of bad faith by simply counter-asserting that we can indeed be truly selfless sometimes, because Sartre’s position will dialectically include our assertion of our own selflessness as itself being, in fact, further egotism! Rather, Marcel begins by agreeing with Sartre that the ego, objectified phenomenologically as the structure of our idea/image of ourselves, is not trustworthy as the positive entity it claims to be, because its real concrete existence is as the grasping hunger of Nothingness to become

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<sup>18</sup> Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, Vol.2, trans. R. Hague (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press,2001), p. 9.; as quoted by Michael Healy, “Hope and Despair in Marcel: Images and Underlying Attitudes,” *Marcel Studies* 8:1 (2023), p.43.

Something. This rather complicated-sounding point is only the restatement of a very ordinary psychological fact which every adult human being is almost guaranteed to have encountered concretely in everyday life. Anyone who tells us that they are humble should be suspected of being very proud indeed; anyone who tells us how generous they are should be suspected of not having the love of others before the love of themselves in their heart. We intuitively recognize that they may well possess these virtues to some degree, but only to the degree that they do not *boast* of them, which is why Marcel concurs that the conscious claim of the ego is simply untrustworthy—it is not itself evidence one way or the other about the underlying existential state of affairs of the individual’s *habitus*. A virtue which we *self-consciously* possess is not, strictly as such, a virtue at all, but rather a self-deception we are foisting on others. By conceding this much to Sartre, Marcel can then overcome Sartre by simply asserting the inverse: our genuine virtues are *unconscious*. We can be reassured, against the boundary case of Sartre’s rigorous ethical skepticism, that we are being genuinely selfless or generous whenever we undergo a related and genuine breakdown of the ego.<sup>19</sup> Thus Marcel’s metaphysical theory of the structure of the ego is in fact the exact opposite of the placid “self-thinking-itself” that was the basis of the previous theories of hospitality. Marcel’s ego, like Sartre’s, is a nothingness so empty that it is a hunger, a vacuum that devours its positive surroundings. Marcel claims that every person originates his or her ego in childhood as an act of self-positing: at some point I first “*produce myself*.”<sup>20</sup> When I bring my guardian some treasure that I have found, what I really wish to emphasize is that it was “I, and no other,” who found it.<sup>21</sup> Likewise, at some critical point in the development of my soul I become ready to claim and fight others for what is mine; as he puts it, “the instantaneous claiming of our own property is one of the most significant of our experiences.”<sup>22</sup> Having made myself into an *I* by articulating “*that’s mine*,” I begin to slowly expand outward into the world. From the later perspective of adult life, we therefore have to first undergo the effort of *undoing* our own ego existentially before we can examine it ontologically, from the “outside.”

Recalling the half-forgotten situation of early childhood, before the ego *was*, reveals some surprising truths. Rather than a simple, absolute substance, I am originally a kind of tentative legal claim, “a highly sensitive. . . mobile enclosure” for every intentional object in my environment which will help define *me*.<sup>23</sup> As Marcel says, “My ego is not a substance but an emphasis I give to some element that needs to be protected or recognized.”<sup>24</sup> The ego is constituted by excluding competitive others, establishing a “global presence” which enfolds elements of the situation into itself.<sup>25</sup> Marcel defines my desire for objects, others, and my own body to be “at my disposal”; as what he describes as “having.”<sup>26</sup> In phenomenological language,

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<sup>19</sup> By way of further clarification, discussion here is not ruling out an ordinary existential state of affairs in which our conscious self-congratulation and self-criticism and our conscious efforts to practice virtue, along with our unconscious expressions of the habitual disposition of the true self for good or evil, are mixed and blended together in varying degrees. I think that such is, of course, normally the case. The philosophical point is to answer Sartre’s skeptical challenge to *prove* that there is any case in which we can be *absolutely certain* that we are not being egotistical in our generosity. Marcel’s answer is that there is *at least* one: in the case where the ego crumbles entirely.

<sup>20</sup> Marcel, *Homo Viator*, p.15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.13–14.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.15–16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>26</sup> Marcel, *Being and Having*, trans. Katherine Farrer (London: Collins, 1949), pp.89–90.

Marcel is arguing that the ego is nothing more than the sum of my intentional relations, the acts by which I search for myself among, and push myself out into, the objects of the world, upon which I stake my claim.<sup>27</sup> My ego expands to fill what I identify as being in some way Mine. Correspondingly, I define the Other only by distinction from the Same as myself, i.e., my possessions.<sup>28</sup>

For Marcel, the human ego is therefore established from the beginning as a contradiction in terms. I have identified myself as inhering in what I possess or control, and so if these objects are ever distinguished clearly from me psychologically, I will see that I am nothing.<sup>29</sup> In fact, the objects and persons, defined with respect to myself, that make up my “identity” are constantly threatening to assert their independence from my ego, and thus destroy the fragile illusion of my selfhood. I am motivated to appease or destroy the rebellious rumblings of my possessed “world” and save myself; thus, rather than “having,” I slowly become “the servant of having.”<sup>30</sup> As I grow into adulthood, the burden of my internal contradiction and the strain of serving my possessions begins to bring me despair.

As an adult in society, having forgotten the origin of my ego, “I am an assemblage of functions.”<sup>31</sup> I “have” the world theoretically under my control through the “construction of models,” but of course my models, in fact, have me—I cannot think without them and I become unimaginative, fearful, stereotyping.<sup>32</sup> I am pulled painfully out of my lost center in all directions, by my work, my social position, my possessions, and the demands of other people, and whatever “I” might have been vanishes. Faced with such instability, I am torn apart by anxiety. I suffer from “the anguish of being at once a void and a desire to annex absolutely everything.”<sup>33</sup> I am racked by “the burning of desire and the covetousness of knowing that what [I have] will pass away.”<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, “I am what I despair of.”<sup>35</sup> In this state I am *encumbered* or burdened with myself; I am “unavailable.”<sup>36</sup> “Myself” is an umbra which, as we see, for Marcel includes not only my physical possessions but the whole structure of my thinking, my theoretical model of the world, my society, and my place in it. I *possess* who I think I am, I “*have*” an idea of this; but slowly “who I think I am” possesses me, through the mechanism of my total reliance on this model for consciousness itself. That is the ego.

Here we see that through Marcel’s eyes our original account of hospitality has undergone an extraordinary deconstruction into a series of outrageous paradoxes. The surface-level account of Marcelian hospitality as “self-gift” cannot stand, I think, in the face of Marcel’s extensive and coherent account of the “ego” as an artificial and destructive encumbrance. In fact, when Marcel looks at the pleased host handing a glass of water to his grateful guest, he sees a person who literally cannot give because his hands are too full (!). The materials of possession, rather than being the medium between host and guest, are an insurmountable barrier to their true community. What, now, of the guest, the stranger?

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<sup>27</sup> See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), particularly pp.52–67.

<sup>28</sup> See *Being and Having*, p.187, also p.160, on the experience of possessing.

<sup>29</sup> See *Homo Viator*, p.16.

<sup>30</sup> *Homo Viator*, pp.61–62.

<sup>31</sup> Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, pp.10–11.

<sup>32</sup> *Being and Having*, p.183.

<sup>33</sup> *Homo Viator*, p.16.

<sup>34</sup> *Being and Having*, pp.176–77.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.41–42.

<sup>36</sup> *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, p.42.

The only escape from the crisis of “having” is for an event to occur to me in which I can see (or remember) clearly that I *constructed* my ego, an event in which I can escape the possessions that bind me into a place and role. For Marcel, this event is precisely the arrival of the stranger. As he observes, “From a stranger may come a call that turns our perspective inside out.”<sup>37</sup> Marcel’s ultimate conception of hospitality is thus just as paradoxical as his definition of the ego: Even though I am the host, it is the *stranger* who gives *me* the gift of recalling that I, too, am fundamentally and originally only a wanderer on this earth, a “Homo Viator,” and nothing that I have is truly mine. For Marcel, it is in fact only the recollection that my possessions *are not mine* that liberates me to give them to another in need. This is how Marcel defines his crucial technical term “availability” (*disponibilité*).<sup>38</sup> As Treanor has noted, Levinas criticized Marcel on the grounds that Marcel’s alterity is ultimately only relative to the ego.<sup>39</sup> However, as we have seen above, it is entirely possible to look towards the “absolute other” phenomenologically and yet still only *use* the other as a reflective deontological surface to further structure my own ego. The paradox of Marcel’s position is that, in focusing inward on the experience of my ego, he still manages to catch the moment when the stranger *dissolves* my ego. It seems to me that critics of Marcel must have missed the crucial importance of this rather disagreeable surprise, this *shock*. Rather than the stranger being the same as me, I fall apart to become the same as the stranger: we are both displaced and incomplete—pilgrims. For Marcel, hospitality is the most vivid expression of the key existential virtue of “availability”—but availability is a project required of *every* human ego/subject, as constituted “on the way” as a wanderer or “Homo Viator.” Therefore, Marcelian hospitality cannot possibly require possessions as a prerequisite; rather, the true Marcelian host is someone who is the kind of person who can be “at home” anywhere, who can commandeer whatever they have around them—even nothing at all—for just long enough to empty it out on behalf of another. But such a true host cannot become this kind of person unless they have already been given a gift themselves—the gift of recollection or awakening to their true status as a “co-wanderer” in the world. The final piece of Marcel’s incredible reconfiguration of hospitality, then, is the true place of the stranger. In a joyful and wondrous paradox, in the hospitable act it is the *stranger* who gives the gift, the gift of the memory of the true metaphysical condition of humankind. The hospitable one is emptied of a false grasp on what he “has,” stripped of possession while remaining in stewardship of himself, and it is the pilgrim who makes a gift from the fullness of a need, serving as a concrete example of every ego/subject’s true situation.

How do we know that this process, true hospitality, is genuinely occurring rather than the self-delusions of “false hospitality”? The moment of true hospitality seems to begin with what Marcel calls the “extension of credit.” I place my trust in the other, I offer the guest the possibility of disappointing me.<sup>40</sup> In other words, the phenomenological evidence that we have genuinely surrendered our possessions and ideas and begun to break down our “substantive” Ego is the appearance of a fear that I might be destroyed and a trust that the guest will not harm me. The deepening of the surrender of “availability” is in the realization that I have made even my whole *self* available. I make room for the other *within* myself, as Marcel says.<sup>41</sup> This is the point at which it is not merely my possessions which are at risk in the gift of hospitality, but me

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<sup>37</sup> *Being and Having*, p.78.

<sup>38</sup> *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, pp.39–41; see also *Being and Having*, pp.176–79.

<sup>39</sup> Treanor, *Aspects of Alterity*, pp.78.

<sup>40</sup> See Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, pp.134–36.

<sup>41</sup> See *Creative Fidelity*, pp.89–93.

myself, in the possibility of abuse or injury. Expecting my guest to behave well, and—I think—waiting on the guest to give *me* something intangible, is “in some way to give” the gift of my being, to extend a faith and hope that truly make the host and the guest equal.<sup>42</sup> If I reflect wisely in the moment when I joyfully place not only all my belongings but my own self at the disposal of my guest, I am gifted anew with the awareness that my soul belongs to me only as a “hazard,” as a risk of damnation which can be saved precisely by gambles on the other such as the hospitable act.<sup>43</sup> This reminder of the precariousness, the insubstantiality of my supposed “Ego-place” gently pushes me out into a path. I become conscious that I am united with the stranger in a community of pilgrims, on a journey of hope between birth and death.<sup>44</sup>

Thus, for Marcel hospitality does not come from an emplaced ego; rather, it *displaces* the ego and shatters it. Hospitality does not *require* possessions; rather, hospitality *destroys* possessions, and their “handedness-for-my-purposes,” by making them visible again as potential chains of the pilgrim-souls who must always be on their way.<sup>45</sup> Marcel explicitly states that charity belongs most profoundly to those who are impoverished.<sup>46</sup> *Hospitality does not transfer goods from the host to the guest; rather, the guest’s arrival sets the host free from bondage to his place and goods.*

I suggest that this delightful account has a number of advantages over the one which was our starting point. First, the great advantage of Marcel’s position is that it makes hospitality a fundamental orientation rather than a conditional virtue, a way of placing oneself that is open to all selves and is in fact *demande*d of all selves as part of the liberation into “availability.”<sup>47</sup> It is a way of seeing the truth; a comprehensible relation established between the ego and that which lies beyond the phenomenological horizon of transcendental apperception, the “true self.” Marcel’s hospitable stance can be reached at any time by anyone, in mutual enactment with the realization of one’s own status as pilgrim. It seems to me that this captures a truer and broader picture of the philosophical essence of the act of hospitality, the possibility of poetic, *raconteur* moments between two people who may have nothing to share at all but their own will to generosity, their *disponibilité*. Hospitality is not just *giving* a home but *making* a home; but the fact that the act of *making* is required paradoxically discloses that the world is not intrinsically our home, after all. Second, Marcel’s account, operating at the same level of phenomenological sophistication as Sartre’s challenge, is able to answer and surmount a Sartrean accusation of “bad faith,” whereas the original, “ontological” definition was not. Third, once hospitality emerges in this way, for Marcel, it is also set into dialectical motion. Hospitality does not stop, but ramifies outwards and downwards. Since, in the Marcelian act of true hospitality, the “host” appears within the guest and the “guest” appears within the host, the two become indistinguishable, and reappear in unexpected places—the dyadic structure becomes a dialectical turning. I find there are three great dynamic cycles of hospitality that can be extrapolated from Marcel’s writing: the household/outsider, the child/family, and the self/self.

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<sup>42</sup> *Homo Viator*, p.49.

<sup>43</sup> *Being and Having*, pp.98–99.

<sup>44</sup> See *Homo Viator*, pp.7–11.

<sup>45</sup> Thus I believe that Marcel’s remarks at pp.27–28, and at pp.88–91 of *Creative Fidelity* must be interpreted against the light of his ideas as a whole. We must be welcomed into a home, but “the home” is an environment created by the hospitable person out of whatever materials might be to hand, or of none at all—that is why Marcel describes the home as a “fundamental condition,” when he would have been well aware through his work at the War Office that some people lack homes.

<sup>46</sup> See *Being and Having*, pp.76–77.

<sup>47</sup> On availability as a “stance,” see McCown, *Availability*, pp.7–18.

1) When the pilgrim comes to me as an adult, he is the stranger that I welcome into the household. In the household, the persons that may already live together tend, I believe, to become habitually the Same for one another—thus the saying “familiarity breeds contempt.” However, genuinely welcoming the stranger will allow me to see the members of my household with new eyes, as being also pilgrims even though they happen to have a temporary “place” along with me. There are some suggestions along these lines in *Being and Having* and in *Creative Fidelity*. Even my own family will become temporarily and partially “estranged” for the better; when I really make an effort of this kind, such that I feel a deep gratitude to the person who made demands of *me*, isn’t it easier for a little while afterwards to be kinder and more considerate to those with whom I have long lived? Hospitality is thus contagious in society; the destabilizing and reorienting effects of the awakening to the “*Via*” are not limited to one ego, but all that was familiar becomes unknown and new.

2) As noted above, each of us began life as a guest in the heart of our family. I came among my family as a stranger. In my view, the phenomenological-historical analysis of the ego’s coming-to-be in relation to the parents,’ in *Homo Viator*; is still of tremendous and untapped philosophical significance. Although I do not find that Marcel discusses this explicitly, here also there is the possibility of a further notion of hospitality; my experience of the hospitality, or need of hospitality, in my childhood will remind me when I become the host that *my* children are strangers newly arrived in this world.

3) Finally, Marcel makes the profound observation in *Homo Viator* and in *Being and Having* that there is a “city that I form with myself”<sup>48</sup>; even I, all alone, am not a solitary ego but a dialectical composition of inner community, I-as-host and I-as-guest. “He who is patient to himself treats his young ego with care,” Marcel says.<sup>49</sup> Far from egocentrism, in inviting the dynamic of hospitality within even ourselves we make permanent the dissolution of our grasping Ego: the “love of oneself as disposable is a command of God.”<sup>50</sup> In this final stage, in which hospitality and pilgrimage blend into a harmonious unity within one person, we are able to give ourselves “to what offers irrevocably”: the drama of the communal journey to God. In such a world, charity will emerge “burning like a flame.”

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<sup>48</sup> *Homo Viator*, p.61.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p.39.

<sup>50</sup> *Being and Having*, p.77.